Cahiers du MONDE RUSSE

Cahiers du monde russe
Russie - Empire russe - Union soviétique et États indépendants

58/1-2 | 2017
1917

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Historiography, revolutionary dynamics and disputed remembrance

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OpenEdition Journals

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/10059
DOI: 10.4000/monderusse.10059
ISSN: 1777-5388

Publisher
Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 January 2017
Number of pages: 9-14
ISBN: 978-2-7132-2696-0
ISSN: 1252-6576

Electronic reference
Catherine Gousseff, Stefan Plaggenborg and Alessandro Stanziani, « 1917 », *Cahiers du monde russe* [Online], 58/1-2 | 2017, Online since 01 January 2017, Connection on 25 September 2020. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/10059 ; DOI : https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.10059

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FOREWORD

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Historiography, revolutionary dynamics and disputed remembrance

In 2004, Gottfried Schramm published a book full of wisdom as to the structural preconditions of historical success.[1] He asked why at a certain moment of history new ideas gained momentum and acheived historical endurance, i.e., what made them successful. History knows many more examples of lost significance and failure than long-lasting success. Schramm studied the beginning of monotheism, the emergence of Christendom, the Reformation, the beginning of representative democracy in Northern America, and socialism or the Bolshevik experiment. He wanted to exemplify his approach and did not look for completeness. However, Russia's 1917 was the case that showed why this parting of way in history did not achieve lasting historical significance like the other ones. His book about partings of way (*Wegscheiden*) in world history reminds us of the problem we have today when we try to commemorate and "celebrate" Russia's 1917. This issue of *Cahiers du Monde russe* cannot escape from these thoughts. If historians do not look at the revolutionary year and its pre-history alone but take into consideration what followed, they are challenged to answer one of the main questions: What is left of 1917?

The question remains: What does persist after the revolution that intensified and accelerated processes of human, moral, institutional, cultural, political and economic change, then turned into destruction, already begun during the First World War and made it macabrely blossom? The Russian Revolution led to the liquidation of institutions, law, traditions and human beings on a huge scale. It created its own version of ambivalent modernity. Furthermore, historians should take into consideration the experiences of people who lived through and often suffered from this way of history.

As Ferretti's article hereafter shows, the reconstruction of the past was an extremely difficult task under and after Gorbachev. When the boiling debates during perestroika initially erased the years of Stalin's rule and a little later the "good" Lenin and the October Revolution from the honourable pages of Soviet history, the effects were quite contradictious as to the

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1Gottfried Schramm, *Fünf Wegscheiden der Weltgeschichte: Ein Vergleich* (Göttingen, 2004).

managing of life-experiences by the people. For many citizens of the USSR and elsewhere, more than seventy years of construction of socialism tragically collapsed, for others the breakdown liberated hearts, minds and speech. The former fell silent in a suddenly re-evaluated and for many sympathisers of socialism and victorious fighters against National Socialism now void historical existence, the latter started to speak and with them the recently opened archives. This speech was about a different history than that which they had been taught, a history where violence and triumph, victimisation and participation coincided. According to Ferretti, these contradictions help to understand the "impossible memory" in Russia particularly as regards the 1917 revolution. On the one hand, as a Bolshevik act, it had to be erased from public and official memory; but on the other hand, it kept all its importance as a nationalistic process.

Probably all historians agree to the fact that there is no explosive research agenda concerning 1917 anymore. We have a solid knowledge about what happened and why and who took part. This in mind, there is no reason to waste the readers' time and reopen the field of 1917 again. But is that true?

When we, as editors of this issue, started thinking about what to do with the centenary of Russia's 1917, we came to the following conclusion. Mainly three aspects make 1917 still worth looking at.

Historiography. Firstly, historiography has its own history, so why not interview some prominent historians who have been working on the revolution for years and may be regarded as walking examples of historical research?

Two main entries are developed: interviews with prominent historians of 1917; and historiographies. Marc Ferro gives us a lively and refreshing insight in his thinking along with beautiful stories, ideological context of his major contributions and the way he would develop certain aspects if he had to rewrite his books. He is probably the only one who allows the ideals of the revolution another chance in the future. Richard Pipes has very distinct, let us say not really surprisingly, opinions about 1917 and today's Russia and does not recommend writing another history of the revolution. Manfred Hildermeier much more argues in the realm of methods and social factors of revolution.

The interviews were a starting point for a review of research on the Russian Revolution including the interviewees' own respectful oeuvre. While historiography is already at stake in the conversations, we are happy to publish articles about trends and developments in research. These articles present historiographies along their national origin. At first sight, this may seem at odds with a global event such as the Russian Revolution. Indeed, we consider that, as in many other fields, in this case as well, if not more, historiographies are tributaries of both national academic institutions and political orientations. The way (West) German historians, US historians and Russian positioned

themselves towards the revolution responded not only to personal biographies—although relevant—but also to the context in which their works were produced. If some concerns were international—the global cold war, for example—some others were not. The inclusion of Russian history into specific departments or general departments of history is one variable; the historians' backgrounds—more kin to Slavic studies or to general history—are another. In short, we had no preconceived thesis and wanted to test the hypothesis whether making the history of the revolution had the same meaning and responded to the same questions in, say, the United States and Germany. The political context, as well as historians, was partially different, with a major role played in the United States by historians originating from Central and Eastern Europe, if not Russia. The answers brought hereafter would certainly lead the reader to form their own answer. Thus, Matthias Stadelmann's article about German historiography on the Russian Revolution perfectly corresponds to the interview with Hildermeier because it delivers the historiographical background to the latter's words. It also shows the specific historical conditions under which historiography in (West) Germany had to overcome the legacy of National Socialist research programmes. Peter Holquist critically reviews recent publications in the anglophone world; he sees a tendency towards levelling out the role and significance of the revolution, and again stresses the fact of revolution.

The second section of the volume belongs to the time of the revolution and its inscription between war and civil war. Peter Gatrell takes a fresh look at refugees—evidently a very contemporary topic—during war and revolution, a topic which in contrary to the results of Boris Kolonitskii was really forgotten. Gatrell not only describes problems of care and repatriation but also shows the effects of national care organisations on nation-building processes, showing paradoxically, through care during the war, the growing civic consciousness within Russian society. As we know, revolution was not the same in Petrograd and in the periphery or in provincial towns and cities. Research on the "non-capital" history of revolution is far from being completed. The question of local self-government and the role of zemstva has been discussed for the time of the Provisional Government. Liudmila Novikova focuses on the zemstva in Arkhangel´sk region after October and describes their fate under White rule. She shows how zemstva came under governmental centralisation and were urged to function as mobilising factors during the civil war. Last but not least, Tamara Kondratieva asks: when do revolutions end? She answers the question with the help of Fëdor Raskolnikov, Bolshevik fighter, diplomat and renegade. His life-story shows that revolutions end when revolutionaries stop believing in what they have been fighting for.

The third section focuses on memories. Since the question of how to commemorate 1917 is one of the most important ones in our days, two articles discuss politics of memory. Maria Ferretti convincingly explains the problems of the Russian side to find a modus vivendi with 1917; she places the meaning of nation and empire and their political usage within a process of handling and managing history that started during perestroika, changed under El´tsin and blossomed out under Putin. Boris Kolonitskii looks at the "forgotten war," i.e., the

First World War, and its representation in memory as is shown particularly by the way in which former tsarist general Brusilov was treated over the years. The war, Kolonitskii says, was neither simply forgotten nor should it be treated within the framework of patriotism; he therefore advocates comparative approaches to define the Russian version of memory. Although the caravan of historians on the Soviet Union has moved "forward" from revolution to Stalinism and now arrived at the station of post-Stalinism, there is reason enough to look "back" to the starting point of Soviet history. This volume does not dare to determine how Russia's 1917 should be looked at but tries to come along with a still disturbing phenomenon which does not affect only the Russians. Why is it so?

Now that the cold war is over, there is space for a new trend in the historical investigation of the revolution. For this reason, it is important to carefully examine the historiography of and the historians writing on the revolution during the cold war. The history of the historiography itself feeds on this period and its heritage; it is now time to put this historiography into an appropriate historical context to identify new lines of reasoning. Which ones?

The identification of relevant actors is crucial. In conventional historiography, the heroes, then protagonists of the revolution, were the workers and soviets, political leaders, and to a given extent peasants. Over the years, this picture complexified: experts, refugees, soldiers, writers, colonized people were added as Kolonitskii's, Gatrell's and Kondratieva's articles remind us. However, one relevant task is not only to identify appropriate actors, beyond pre-defined ideological models of historical dynamics, but also, and related to this, to put these actors into their own time. From this standpoint, Russia's double revolution in 1917 was no episode in history. The prominent historian Eric Hobsbawm let the Soviet era almost completely coincide with the time-span of the "short" 20th century.[2] In the past two decades, there has been a greater tendency to examine the war and revolution as intertwined events. This attitude accelerated greatly with the 2014 centenary of the war's outbreak; this led to opening two connected fields: on the one hand, war as a great transformation, in Polanyi's meaning, of the European economies and societies. From this perspective, the modernization paradigm and the mutual influences between Germany and Russia are usually evoked. Another line of reasoning stresses the collapse of the "old European empires" during World War One: the Russian, the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian empires.[3] At the moment, we have not a clear historical investigation connecting the two aspects, that is, the Imperial architecture and the national economic dimension. It is nevertheless worth noting that, under

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2Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (London, 1994).

3Michael Reynolds' *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908-1918* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

Putin and the new revival of Russian nationalism in the historiography, there are attempts consisting precisely in evacuating the relationship between the war and the revolution and between the revolution and the empire, while stressing only the patriotic meaning of war (Kolonitskii).

The same trouble lies with periodization; on the one hand, longue durée approaches seek to stress the long-term transformation of Russian society and economy; some go back as far as 1613 in a strange attitude that Marc Bloch qualified as "origins' idolatry." For sure, continuities were important before and after 1917, as several papers and authors remind us in the following pages. At the same time, the revolutionary break also requires an explanation. New directions in historical investigation suggest a complementarity instead of an opposition between approaches stressing the revolutionary break and other underlining continuities. This argument is relevant to the interpretation not only of 1917 but also of its heritage. "When does the revolution end?" is the crucial question in Kondratieva's and, to a given extent, Ferretti's papers. The first theme goes back to the representation and use of the revolution under Stalin, the second raises a similar question under Gorbachev. The construction of a political memory of the revolution, and of its ending, is a major concern of the present issue.

The boundaries are hard to identify between different practices of history, political supervision and censorship, and fiction. Stalin himself controlled the representation of the revolution not only in official party tales and historiographic representations, but also in drama and literature (Kondratieva). This is not to say that the line between "fake" and "real" does not matter in Soviet history, but that it was and still is an object of conflict in itself and requires proper investigation.

Through this uncertain boundary between genres, the political relevance of revolutionary memory tends to blur chronological boundaries: thus, Thermidor surfaces during and after the Bolshevik revolution while the latter becomes almost a contemporary, living event during the cold war and then perestroika. The past is not just re-evaluated under present-day circumstances, it becomes present. Again, the question is not so much about contrasting truth with fiction or, at the opposite, to adopt post-modernist approaches, but precisely to understand how these boundaries have been settled and changed, by whom and why. The following papers seek to answer this question.

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